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Turkey-Iran Relations after the Islamic Revolution of 1979

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran constituted a turning point in Turkish-Iranian relations. Immediately after the revolution, new Iranian leaders declared Iran's withdrawal from CENTO. Thus, the revolution did not only come up with dissolution of that alliance, but also positioned Turkey and Iran against each other. First of all, in terms of its political regime, its commitment to secularism and foreign policy orientation, Turkey represented what the revolutionaries opposed in Iran, where 'fundamentalist Islamists' led by a group of clerics under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini seized power. Soon after, they proclaimed the Islamic Republic and engaged in reversing the Pahlavi 'reforms' towards secularism and Westernisation. Hence, while the two countries were proceeding towards different, or contradictory directions an important pillar of the previous Turkish-Iranian proximity was destroyed. Secondly, Turkey was still a close ally of the United States in contrast to the rise of anti-Americanism in revolutionary Iran. Whilst the US-Iran relations were heading towards direct confrontation between Tehran and Washington, particularly after the hostage crisis, the alliance between Washington and Ankara was strengthened after the military coup d'état of 1980 in Turkey. The close relations between the United States and Turkey were perceived as a potential threat by the revolutionary Iran. Moreover, Iran viewed the coup as an attempt against the Islamic Revolution. Thirdly, the threat of the spread of revolution was alarming for Turkey. Revolutionary Iran was committed to export its revolution to neighbouring countries for strategic and idealist reasons. Ayatollah Khomeini called on neighbouring nations to revolt against their despotic regimes supported by the United States and establish Islamic governments. Khomeini's call alarmed rulers of the adjacent countries including the Turkish elite. Moreover, the early 1980s witnessed the rise of militant Islamists in Turkey, some of whom were highly sympathetic to the Islamic revolution in Iran. For this reason, the Turkish authorities watched the activities of Islamist groups and their relations with Iran, apprehensively. Finally, many people that opposed the revolution in Iran fled the country, some of whom found shelter in Turkey. The Islamic regime in Iran was displeased with the 'counter-revolutionaries' that found refuge at the next door.

On the other hand, conventional Turkish concerns with regard to the prospective fall of Iran to communism or to the Soviet sphere of influence, constrained Turkey's responses to the revolution.¹⁵ Turkey prioritised maintaining stability with Iran and its territorial integrity. Additionally, Turkey was desperately in need of oil at affordable prices, and hence, eager to develop economic ties with its neighbour. Consequently, the Turkish government immediately recognised the new regime and Turkish foreign minister of the time, Gündüz Ökçün visited Tehran in June 1979.¹⁶

The economic motivation of both Turkey and Iran for improving their relations were enhanced throughout the 1980s. Turkey adopted an export-oriented development strategy and searched for valuable markets, whereas Iran suffered from the flight of a considerable amount of international capital and from Western economic sanctions. Moreover, the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war compelled both countries to improve their trade ties with Turkey in order to ensure deliverance of basic goods. The then Turkish deputy prime minister Turgut Özal, accompanied by a crowd of businessmen visited Tehran in March 1982. They concluded a barter trade agreement that envisaged Iranian oil supply in return for wheat, dairy products, and poultry. Subsequently, the then prime minister Bülent Ulusu paid an official visit to Iran in August 1982, when the two countries agreed to establish joint economic commission in order to promote bilateral trade relations and address potential problems. Later on, the two countries revived the dormant RCD, and turned it into Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) in 1985. Thus, the annual trade volume between the two countries amounted to two billion US dollars in the mid-1980s.¹⁷ Iran then became the second largest oil supplier for Turkish market (after Iraq).

In the 1980s the Kurdish question posed a new challenge for Turkish-Iranian relations. Initially, Turkey watched apprehensively at the growing military partnership between the Iraqi Kurdish parties and Iran, against Iraq. Moreover, instability in the north of Iraq as part of Kurdish fight against Baghdad helped the PKK Kurdish separatist movement, to settle there and wage armed attacks inside Turkey. The Kurdish parties that were supported by Iran, particularly the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) had close relations with the PKK, and Iran had reportedly allowed the activities of the PKK inside Iranian territories. In order to alleviate the security concerns of both parties, Ankara and Tehran signed a security protocol in 1984. Accordingly, the parties assured each other they would prevent the activities of any group or movement that threatened security of the other.¹⁸

The adverse effects of the ideological discrepancy between the Islamic Republican regime in Iran and the western-oriented, secular Turkish republic haunted the bilateral relations of the two countries towards the late 1980s.¹⁹ In particular, the censures of Iranian leaders with respect to the prevalence of secularism in Turkey and its Western-orientation, in addition to its alliance with the United States were widely circulated in the Turkish media. In return, Turkish officials heavily reprimanded the Iranian regime and its own orientation, which led to a verbal quarrel through the media between the two countries. Additionally, the statements of Iranian officials condemning a resolution of the constitutional court that confirmed ban on hijab in Turkish universities, were viewed by Turkish elite as the Iranian interference in domestic affairs. Additionally, Iran was accused of supporting some Islamist movements in Turkey. Eventually, the two countries mutually withdrew their ambassadors in 1989.

The tension between Turkey and Iran noticeably escalated in the 1990s. Firstly, ideological confrontation prevailed over bilateral relations.²⁰ In this period, ideological tension between Ankara and Tehran went beyond mutual criticisms against each other's political regime through the media. There was a revival of Islamic activism in the early 1990s as proved both by the rise of principal political Islamist party, Refah Partisi, and the growing number of extremist religious groups. Moreover, some of these extremist groups, like Hizbullah, armed themselves and started to perpetrate terrorist attacks. It may be argued that Iranian intelligence used some Turkish Islamists in order to gather information on Iranian dissidents in Turkey and stage some operations against them, and to attack some foreign diplomats in Ankara.²¹ After a series of assassinations against well-known secular Turkish intellectuals, including Bahriye Üçok, Çetin Emeç, Turan Dursun and Uğur Mumcu, the Turkish security elite hinted at Iranian involvement in these attacks. Confessions of the perpetrators of some terror attacks arguably revealed political and logistic connections between Iran and the militants. Henceforth, Iran was continuously accused of supporting radical Islamist organisations and terrorist groups in order to destabilise and weaken the republican regime, which would eventually be replaced by an Islamist one.²²

Secondly, Turkish security concerns that deepened in this period led to the securitisation of Turkish politics and foreign policy. In addition to the rise of the perceived threat from increasing Islamist activism, the threat of 'Kurdish separatism' and 'terrorism' was considered by the Turkish elite as major threats to national security. Increasing armed activities of the PKK, which exploited political instability in the north of Iraq after the Gulf War of 1991 became a major security concern. As a result, Turkish armed forces pursued comprehensive operations against the PKK both inside the country and in the north of Iraq. The Turkish government then frequently charged Iran, and Syria, of supporting the PKK activities.²³

Against this background, the opposing strategic alignments of the two countries across the region amplified the security concerns of the two parties. Besides its close relations with the United States, Turkey intensified its relations with Israel into a strategic partnership in the mid-1990s, which irked the Iranian leaders who viewed that development as a hostile action against the revolutionary regime.²⁴ In return, Iran consolidated its relations with Syria and Russia, which equally disturbed the Turkish elite. In addition, Iran and Turkey crafted alternative 'alliances' with rival Kurdish parties in the north of Iraq in order to control the region and contain their respective Kurdish 'opposition' activities there. While Turkey developed good relations with the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) led by Masoud Barzani, Iran maintained a close affinity with the PUK led by Jalal Talabani.

Finally, after the dissolution of the USSR, Ankara and Tehran engaged in competition for influence over the newly independent states in the Caucasus and Central Asia. This competition had both ideological and economic aspects. The Turkish government presented its political regime, as a secular, Western-oriented regime based on free-market economy, as a model to be followed by the newly independent states of the region. At that time, most of the Western countries led by the United States promoted these new republics to adopt the Turkish model, against the 'fundamentalist' model of Iran. For its part, the Iranian government was concerned with the rise of 'Pan-Turkism' in the region that was supported by the West, which would threaten vital interests of Iran, particularly in the case of Azerbaijan which was very sensitive for Iranian security

considerations. Hence, both countries rushed to improve their political, cultural and economic relations with these republics. Another aspect of the geopolitical competition over the region revolved around the construction of oil and gas pipelines for the energy resources of the Caspian basin. Eventually a deal for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline that sidelined Iran was signed in 1994. However, Iran prevented the construction of any gas pipeline that would bypass Iran by shipping Turkmenistan's natural gas to Turkey and the rest of Europe through the Caspian basin, exploiting its contested status. By the late 1990s the newly independent states consolidated their independence and counterbalanced their behaviour towards Iran and Turkey. In addition to the lack of adequate economic capacity in Ankara and Tehran to maintain their competition over Central Asia, the revival of Russian influence in the region eased Iranian-Turkish contention.²⁵

The growing tension between Ankara and Tehran reached its height and turned into a diplomatic crisis in the second half of the 1990s. Besides Mohammad Reza Bagheri, Iranian ambassador to Ankara, a number of Iranian diplomats in Turkey were compelled to leave the country in February 1997, allegedly for interfering in domestic politics. Iran retaliated by dismissing the Turkish ambassador to Tehran, Osman Korutürk, alongside some other diplomats. Ambassadors of the respective states returned in March 1998. Then, mutual accusations of involvement in destructive activities against each other, and mutual denouncements of their respective political regimes between the two capitals resurfaced in the media headlines. Eventually Iran blamed Turkey for violating its airspace and bombing territories inside Iran while taking military action against the PKK, and captured two Turkish soldiers in August 1999 for illegally crossing the border. Although the controversy over the Turkish bombardment of Iranian soil and the captured soldiers was soon settled, tension remained high between the two countries. Consequently, newly elected Turkish President A. Necdet Sezer abstained from participation to the ECO Summit meeting held in Tehran in June 2000.²⁶

As an extension of the deterioration in Turkish-Iranian relations through the 1990s, economic transactions between the countries considerably decreased. Combined with the economic crisis experienced in the respective countries and the decline in oil prices, total trade volume decreased to below one billion US dollars per year from the peak of two billion in the 1980s. Another factor that contributed to the decline in bilateral economic relations was the cancellation of the barter trade agreements in 1985 by Iran, which blamed Turkish traders for overcharging third party products to their Iranian counterparts. Hence, Turkish exports to Iran remained at around four hundred to five hundred million dollars between 1986 and 1992. The value of Turkish exports to Iran further fell to below two hundred million in 1998 and 1999, while the total volume of trade between the two countries was around six hundred and fifty million in 1998.²⁷

Notwithstanding the rising tension between Ankara and Tehran cooperation in diplomatic, security, and economic aspects was maintained. Despite the rising tension between the two capitals, they preserved diplomatic relations. The two countries agreed to expand the ECO to include Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, and the newly independent Central Asian states in 1992. Additionally, Turkey headed a new international organisation among the leading countries of the Islamic world, called Developing-8 (D-8), which included Iran. Although the effectiveness of the two

organisations is questionable, they facilitated frequent meetings between the member countries and contributed to the improvement of relations among them.

Security cooperation between Iran and Turkey essentially revolved around two issues. The first was border security. As neighbouring countries, they were preoccupied with joint efforts to provide safety and stability around the border and the struggle against smuggling and narcotics. Cooperation between the two countries on border security issues was maintained within the framework of the border security protocol dated 1937. In this respect they maintained ties between both high-level security officials, to the level of local security officials.²⁸ The second issue of security cooperation between Ankara and Tehran focused on containing the threat of 'Kurdish separatism' that was perceived in the respective countries, and was heightened by the PKK activism. Additionally, the activities of Iranian opposition groups in Turkey and some Islamist groups affiliated to Iran emerged as security issues between the two countries. When Turkish Interior Minister, Ismet Sezgin, visited Tehran in September 1992, Turkey and Iran concluded a security protocol. Accordingly, they instituted the Turkish-Iranian High Commission for Security at the level of the undersecretaries of interior ministers, the joint security committee, and the security subcommittees.²⁹ The ensuing security protocols envisaged the prevention of activities of terrorist groups in the respective countries, and their exploitation of the joint border. Another part of Turkish-Iranian security relations was directed to impede the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in the north of Iraq. The shared concerns of Iran, Syria and Turkey in that regard led to a series of tripartite meetings in the early 1990s. The identical stance of Iran and Turkey with regard to the preservation of the territorial integrity of Iraq and the prevention of an independent Kurdish State has been maintained.

As to economic relations, the Joint Economic Commission that was established in 1982 continued to meet regularly in Tehran and Ankara respectively, and addressed major economic, trade and transportation issues. The then prime minister Yildirim Akbulut, visited Tehran in March 1990, where they discussed the feasibility of transferring Iranian gas to Europe through Turkey. Subsequently, the two states started to negotiate on agreements for the encouragement of mutual investments and the prevention of double taxation.³⁰ In this regard, the then prime minister Necmettin Erbakan paid his first official visit to Tehran in August 1996. On that occasion, Turkey and Iran signed the twenty-five-year natural gas agreement. It was projected that Iran would supply Turkey with ten billion cubic meters of natural gas annually. It was a surprise for the United States, which tried to isolate Iran and threatened any third party for investing in the Iranian energy sector. Erbakan was blamed by some pundits for this agreement as an extension of his Islamist foreign policy. However, natural gas trade had been on the agenda of the two countries for over a decade and the Turkish government deemed the agreement to be an instrument to meet growing domestic energy demand and decrease its dependency on Russia. After almost a two-year delay, the pipeline to ship Iranian gas to Turkish markets was completed in December 2001. The commencement of the flow of gas coincided with the ease of tensions between the two countries, and combined, paved the way for growing economic relations between Iran and Turkey. The Turkish Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEIK) and the Iranian Chamber for Commerce, Industries and Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) agreed to the establishment of the Turkish-Iranian Business Council in November 2001.³¹

President Sezer's visit to Iran in June 2002 turned into a milestone in contemporary Turkish-Iranian relations. On the sidelines of the visit, the first meeting of the Turkish-

Iranian Business Forum was held with the participation of the two heads of state. President Sezer inaugurated the chair of Turkish language in Allameh Tabatabai University, and visited Tabriz as part of his program. Sezer's visit was meaningful because he had rejected attending the ECO Summit held in Tehran for the alleged Iranian support for terrorism. Thus, this visit became the symbol of a relatively amicable trend that Turkey-Iran relations entered into just before the JDP came to power in Ankara.

NOTES

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22. For instance, Çevik Bir, then Deputy Commander of the Chief of General Staff of Turkish armed forces, and one of the most influential figures at that time reportedly said that Iran was a registered state sponsor of that embarked on exporting its Islamic regime to Turkey, and supported the PKK. Yasemin Çongar, 'Bir: İran tescilli terörist,' *Milliyet*, 21 February 1997.
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27. Bayram Sinkaya, Conflict and Cooperation in Turkey-Iran Relations, 1989-2001, Unpublished Master's Thesis, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, 2004, p.105-108.
28. According to the aforementioned protocol, 50 kilometres distance from the both sides of the border-line is defined as border area. In order to address problems and issues that arouse in the border areas, district governors regularly meet at two-month periods. Governors of the border provinces are regarded as border commissioners and meet twice a year. Additionally, there is a

High Border Commission consisting of director generals in charge of borders at the ministries of foreign affairs. By 2019 the High Border Commission had held 27 meetings. Bülent Öztürk, 'Sınır Güvenliği Kapsamında Türkiye-İran Hudut İlişkileri,' *Uluslararası Medeniyet Çalışmaları Dergisi*, vol. 2, no.2, 2017.

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30. Jenkins, 'Occasional Allies, Enduring Rivals ...,' p.19. Turkey and Iran signed an agreement on the Promotion and Protection of Mutual Investments in 1997, and an agreement on the Prevention of Double Taxation in 2002. Both agreements entered into force in 2005.

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